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Members of the Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis in Shisong, Cameroon, meet during a previous Earth Day commemoration. The congregation's many environmental projects include community gardens that serve as a demonstration site to boost soil fertility. The gardens show that the soil can become fertile again through purely organic manure. (Courtesy of the Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis)



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A "demonstration" community garden is taking shape on congregational land of the Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis in Shisong, Cameroon. A plastics recycling effort in Ghana by the Holy Spirit Sisters is expanding into a small business. The Congregation of the Sacred Word in South Korea uses special "mud balls" to feed fish and clean the water.

And a 25-year-old [ecological center](#) in Minnesota begun by the [School Sisters of Notre Dame](#) is expanding several gardening and farming projects while encouraging local groups to develop their own community growing spaces.

Monday: 'The Life' and the environment

Coming Monday April 26 for this month's "The Life," our sister panelists share ways their congregations promote the beauty of creation and the care of our common home. To read previous editions of "The Life," [click here](#).

All of these efforts — and many others — are examples of how Catholic women congregations around the world are participating in the "[Sowing Hope for the Planet](#)" campaign by the International Union of Superiors General, or [UISG](#).

Catholic sisters have long led the way in caring for creation and promoting environmental awareness through [ecological centers](#), commitments to reducing their [carbon footprint](#) and pressuring corporations to [address issues](#) of climate change and pollution.

The Sowing Hope for the Planet campaign, started in June 2018, furthers that commitment, showcasing how women religious are striving to live out the underlying message of Pope Francis' milestone 2015 encyclical "[Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home](#)" which is marking its fifth anniversary during 2020 and 2021.

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"The religious are doing many things and we are still trying to encourage more public witness about these efforts," said Sr. Sheila Kinsey, who heads the effort. Kinsey, a member of the Franciscan Sisters, Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, also known as the [Wheaton Franciscans](#), notes that while Earth Day (April 22, also known as [International Mother Earth Day](#) by the United Nations) observances are helpful to raise awareness, "we're concerned about the planet 365 days of the year."



Sr. Sheila Kinsey (Provided photo)

Restoring the Earth "is a process, not an event," she said in a recent interview with Global Sisters Report. "You can't do that in one day."

Kinsey serves as the executive co-secretary for the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Commission, or JPIC, of the Rome-based International Union of Superiors General, the global organization that represents the majority of the world's 600,000 sisters. The JPIC commission has partnered with the Global Catholic Climate Movement to promote the Sowing Hope for the Planet campaign.

The Sowing Hope campaign currently has about 1,000 subscribers to its newsletter, Kinsey said. About 800 people have taken an online course on ways to promote *Laudato Si'* in congregations. Most of those are sisters, while others are associates. But some priests and brothers have also taken the course, which began in February.

Kinsey noted that the U.S-based Leadership Conference of Women Religious, or [LCWR](#), has been "actively promoting involvement" in Sowing Hope for the Planet.



Daffodils start to grow with the arrival of spring in the Northern Hemisphere. Earth Day is April 22, also known as International Mother Earth Day by the United Nations.

(UN photo/Mark Garten)

A larger role

Now the effort has an even larger role in supporting the [Laudato Si' Action Platform](#), which invites seven groups on what the campaign calls a seven-year journey to take action "towards integral ecology."

The seven groups are families; dioceses and parishes; schools; universities; hospitals and health care centers; businesses and farms; religious orders and provinces. The Vatican's [Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development](#) is providing the leadership for the platform.

The goals of the platform are wide-reaching and include a "response to the cry of the earth," calling for "greater use of clean renewable energy and reducing fossil fuels in order to achieve carbon neutrality [and] efforts to protect and promote biodiversity."

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The Sowing Hope for the Planet campaign got a boost in February, when the executive council of the [Union of Superiors General](#), an international organization of superiors general of men's religious institutes and societies, gave formal support to the Laudato Si' platform.

While individual men's congregations have joined the Sowing Hope for the Planet campaign, in endorsing the Laudato Si' platform, USG also extended its support to Sowing Hope for the Planet.

Still, it is telling that sisters have been out front on the cause.



Community members in Shisong, Cameroon, tend to a "demonstration" community garden on congregational land of the Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis. The sisters' gardens serve as a demonstration site to boost soil fertility, said Sr. Annette Bikongnyuy said. It's a corrective to traditional agricultural methods, such as clearing trees and using fires for clearing tracts of land. (Courtesy of the Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis)

Cameroon offers an instructive example. The public witness of the Tertiary sisters begins with prayer and reflection. "We are of the earth, born of the earth nourished by 'Mother Earth,' with natural systems providing us with services free of charge," said Sr. Annette Bikongnyuy, who coordinates the province's environmental ministries and leads the annual Earth Day ceremonies.

Bikongnyuy and her sisters take a decided "hands-on approach" to their ministry. If prayer and reflection are cornerstones, they undergird a commitment that includes the development and care of community gardens on congregational land. Vegetable and fruit gardens are tended to by parish and congregational members, and the

produce is shared among them.

The sisters' gardens serve as a demonstration site to boost soil fertility, Bikongnyuy said. Small farmers in rural Cameroon tend to use "old and outdated methods of agriculture" such as clearing trees and using fires for clearing tracts of land, she said, calling these methods "atrocities" that harm and dry up fresh water sources and damage the soil.

The sisters' community gardens are meant to show that the soil can become fertile again through purely organic manure, and that is helped by the planting of about 200 assorted trees to "protect rich water sources," fight climate change and act as a buffer against wildfires, Bikongnyuy said.



Community members in Shisong, Cameroon, tend to a "demonstration" community garden on congregational land of the Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis. (Courtesy of Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis)

The work on the land is supplemented by interfaith workshops on ecological themes that bring together Catholics, Protestants and Muslims, and have continued even during the pandemic, though with masking and social distancing protocols. But the pandemic has made other awareness efforts, like radio programs, key in communicating the message to a wider population, she said.

These are small-scale efforts, but if done collectively with other grassroots work, they can start tipping the balance toward a healthier and more sustainable planet, Bikongnyuy said.

"Every sister has to become an ambassador of Mother Earth to the community in which they serve," she said. "They have to radiate a spirit of care for Mother Earth. All these activities need to continue for this year's [Earth Day] celebration and even beyond."

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That spirit animates work elsewhere. The [Living Earth Center](#) in Mankato, Minnesota, began in 1996 when it was founded as the Center for Earth Spirituality and Rural Ministry, a sponsored ministry of the [School Sisters of Notre Dame](#).

What began as a small community garden and advocacy group has expanded into a "network of gardeners, volunteers, and advocates who are finding common ground and building a resilient community that honors the interconnection of all things and the value that all bring to this Living Earth" notes the center's website.

The Living Earth Center serves the Mankato community in three ways, said the center's executive director, Laura Marsala Peterson, two of them by cultivating what she calls "community growing spaces."

One is a two-acre community garden in Mankato on the School Sisters property, on which about 120 community gardeners and their families grow food primarily for their own use. A newer venture on the outskirts of the city is a one-acre farm called Blue Earth County Community Farm, where local volunteers grow food that is donated to local food pantries and shelters.



The Living Earth Center in Mankato, Minnesota, serves the Mankato community in several ways including the development of a one-acre farm called Blue Earth County Community Farm, where local volunteers grow food that is donated to local food pantries and shelters. (Courtesy of the Living Earth Center)

The center also consults "with small organizations about how they can develop their own community growing spaces," she said. "In all three capacities these community growing spaces are infused with the charism of the School Sisters in that they go beyond just growing food and seek to cultivate deeper connection with the land and each other. These spaces are important not only to the environmental sustainability but also the social resilience of the local area."

Sustainability and roots in a community are important, she said.

"Sometimes on Earth Day, a tree is planted in a public ceremony and then is forgotten," Peterson said. A garden for residents is an example of committing to

longer-term work, she said — work that conveys the sisters' commitment to a wider vision. "Very few people 'walk the talk' like Catholic sisters do."

It is not hard to find other examples of sisters "walking the talk" under the "Sowing Hope" umbrella.

Water protection in Colombia

In Santa Leticia, in southwest Colombia, members of the Religious of the Sacred Heart are working on a project protecting two creeks and a river which supply water to farmers and Indigenous peoples.

One element of the project is coordinating a group of 12 women from Santa Leticia who organize recycling groups and activities "to create solutions for the management of waste and organic fertilizers," as the [Sowing Hope website](#) describes it.

The women are also constructing a recycling center and go to schools to educate young people as a way to counter diseases. "The project benefits the health of villagers, improves the environment and it raises awareness of care for our common home," the website said.

Recycling in Ghana

Recycling is a priority for other sisters. In Ghana, Kinsey noted, "plastic-clogged waterways lead to terrible flooding with just a little rain."

So, Holy Cross sisters in Kasoa, Ghana, have responded with programs that began in 2017. One educates young people in Catholic schools about the need for recycling, and produces public awareness programs in parishes by purchasing spots on local radio shows.

Another parallel grassroots project, started with some support from the congregation's justice office, collects plastics which are sorted and sent to recycling centers for processing.

The congregation asks local citizens to collect plastic waste, which is picked by those involved in the efforts. The items are then taken to the capital of Accra for sale to recycling companies. Revenues are "returned to the local people who helped collect the plastics," [a description](#) on the Sowing Hope website said. "This provides many

with a much-needed source of income especially for women who are not working full-time." The project employs two people and generates income for more than 20 women. The project is currently centered in Kasoa, Ghana, but hopes to expand to other areas in the archdiocese, and "is a direct response to Pope Francis' Encyclical, *Laudato Si'* where the Holy Father asks us to be more attentive to the care of our common home," the report on the website adds.

'Mud balls' in South Korea

And then there are the mud balls. The Sisters of the Congregation of the Sacred Word in South Korea recently began a tradition of making 2,000 small balls of dirt and mud infused with microorganisms that are thrown into ocean water to promote healthy ecology. The event happens during International the United Nations' [World Oceans](#) Day, held on June 8.

The event attracts everyone from youth baseball teams to elderly, all trying to throw the small balls "far into the water," Kinsey said.

Of course, sisters' ministries go beyond projects tied to the Sowing Hope campaign.

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The urgency of such work cannot be underestimated, said Maryknoll [Sr. Melinda Roper](#), who has [spent 36 years in Panama](#) helping create and lead a pastoral, multiracial and multicultural community in the rural Darién province. As part of the initiative, she and other sisters created the ["Web of Life,"](#) an educational retreat which welcomes visitors and focuses on faith, science and the earth.

Roper teaches sustainable agriculture and the need not only to cultivate crops but a change of attitude that gives them a sense of belonging and "place" rooted in the land.



A screenshot of an April 13 Global Sisters Report "Witness and Grace" webinar that featured Srs. Sheila Kinsey and Melinda Roper who discussed their respective parts in the Sowing Hope for the Planet campaign and a Maryknoll ministry in Panama called the "Web of Life." (GSR photo)

Speaking during an April 13 GSR "[Witness and Grace](#)" webinar with Kinsey, Roper said her experience in the tropical rainforest has led her to an unmistakable conclusion: "Until we identify with the land where we live," Roper said, "we are living a fragmented existence."

Kinsey is hopeful about the long-term chances of humanity turning things around for the Earth, but emphasizes that time is of the essence.

And so is solidarity — one small project at a time.

"We have to do this, we have to join together," Kinsey said at the conclusion of an April 15 [UISG webinar](#) in which she gave an update on the Sowing Hope for the Planet campaign. "We really want to make change. And we can. We can. We feel the

Spirit is alive in this work."

Related: [Burning down our common home](#)

This story appears in the [Sustainable Development Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production](#) and [Sustainable Development Goal 14: Life Below Water](#) feature series.